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AUTHOR DALE, WESLEY J.
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ABSTRACT

THERE IS INCREASING PROTEST REGARDING THE VALIDITY AND USEFULNESS OF CURRENT METHODS OF EVALUATING STUDENTS' ABILITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS. WITH HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE TO THE MASSES, INCREASED COMPETITION FOR COLLEGE, GRADUATE SCHOOL, AND GOOD JOBS HAS MADE THE ATTAINMENT OF "GOOD GRADES" MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER. YET THE APPEARANCE OF OBJECTIVITY AND PRECISE EVALUATION IN GRADES REALLY CONCEALS A HOST OF ASSUMPTIONS AND UNDEFINED VARIABLES. MANY ALTERNATIVES HAVE BEEN PROPOSED: PASS/FAIL, SATISFACTORY/UNSATISFACTORY, ETC. THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM OF GRADING HAS MANY ADVANTAGES, HOWEVER; IT HAS BEEN TESTED BY EXPERIENCE AND THE GRADE POINT AVERAGE IS ONE OF THE MOST CONSISTENT INDICATORS OF A STUDENT'S PROBABLE SUCCESS. ALTHOUGH THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM IS OBJECTIONABLE, THERE IS NO ONE PANACEA. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE TEACHER/GRADER BE AWARE OF THE CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF ALTERNATE GRADING METHODS, AND BE WILLING TO EXPERIMENT WITH A MIX OF ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING MORE INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING AND PERSONALIZED DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION. THE RE-EVALUATION OF THE GRADING SYSTEM SHOULD BE EXTENDED TO A COMPLETE RE-EVALUATION OF THE MISSION AND REGULATIONS OF GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMS. (AF)

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CONCERNING GRADING AND OTHER FORMS OF STUDENT EVALUATION

by

Wesley J. Dale, Dean
School of Graduate Studies
University of Missouri-Kansas City

(A talk presented during a panel on Grading and Other Evaluations of Student Achievement during the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, December 4-6, 1969, Washington, D.C.)

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As the first-listed panel member for tonight's discussion of the urgent and complex topic of grading and other evaluations of student achievement, I have chosen to present a broad-brush overview of the evaluation problem as a whole - defining the problem by delineating a few of the principal attacks, and suggesting some of the underlying causes for the grading ferment. This will be followed by a brief summary of the arguments which support traditional grading, along with several recommendations for further discussion, experimentation and possible improvement of our current evaluation practices.

There is widespread and increasingly vocal unrest across the land regarding the validity and usefulness of our current methods for evaluating student abilities and achievement, but the furor is directed mainly at the traditional grading system. If we listen carefully to the din of criticism about grades, it becomes clear that the many and diverse concerns fall into three main areas of dissatisfaction. First, the use of letter grades, with associated numerical values, presents a deceptive appearance of objectivity and precise evaluation. With the judgment reduced to a neat single letter, to which a numerical value can be assigned, the apparent precision of the record in reality conceals a host of assumptions, variables, and methods by which such a record is determined. Second, it is claimed that the use of letter grades and grade point averages distorts and debases the whole learning process--of the individual student, of students in relation to each other, and of students in relation to their instructors. Third, letter grades and grade point averages, because of their assumed accuracy, are often put to questionable uses both by universities and colleges, and by society.

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Why does the concern about student evaluation arise so urgently at this time? The reasons for the impassioned ferment are not hard to find. Grades meant one thing to our society when a privileged few went to college and when the main purpose of a college education for most of the students was to achieve social status, to learn to live the life of gentlemen, or to prepare for entrance into a limited number of learned professions. Grades must mean something quite different to our society, however, when undergraduate education is extended by social right to the broad mass of our young people coming from every social and economic stratum, and when the college degree constitutes a necessary credential for entry into the most important and satisfying occupations and professions.

More students are going to college and admissions are more competitive, resulting in increasingly rigorous standards - both for admission and continuance. There is more competition for the scarce resources for education. More students are going on to graduate schools, as the more desirable careers in our society are closed off to those without graduate training. Graduate schools, in turn, are faced with more potential graduate students than they can accommodate. Their admission standards are apt to climb even higher as they are faced with leveling or decreasing resources for graduate education.

Another reason for the grading ferment is that classes are larger, teachers more mobile and less personal, and grades are more dominant. For some of the oversized classes of today, the IBM grade sheet posted on the door may be the only intellectual guidance offered the individual student. It should be noted, moreover, that grades were once used as a bare symbol of classroom distinction and esoteric achievement. Now, grades have become a vital social currency accompanied by an increased ethical sensitivity and a growing commitment to an egalitarian ideal. This means that grades and the evaluation processes have assumed a new social dimension. Finally, the emergence of discussions, local and national, about grading reflects the dissolution of concensus regarding the role and function of higher education.

A number of alternates are being suggested to the traditional grading system. I will mention a few of these, but time does not permit any to be discussed in detail. It is my feeling that no one of these alone is an adequate alternative to the traditional grading system. Among the possibilities are: a sharp reduction in the use of letter grades - with

options such as pass/fail; satisfactory/unsatisfactory; credit/non-credit; supergrades for two or more courses of similar subject matter; certificates of satisfactory completion; non-reporting of failures or of poor performances; variable weighting of grades, according to the importance of given grades to the students; or, a selected GPA, as, for example, the average of the three best grades of the student among the courses taken in a given semester. Also suggested by critics are grades not given by the teacher, but, rather, by a grading committee or an outside examining board. Finally, many students would like to see used a compilation of individual participation or dossiers, in lieu of grade point averages, class standing, and so forth, for admission to graduate schools. Such dossiers would be student-prepared, which might include some summary elements of grading, but would also illustrate the student's special abilities and range of interests.

But surely something can be said for the defense of the status quo in grading practices. The defense that can be made is, in many ways, a mirror image of the attacks upon letter grading, and rests much of its case on the durability and practicality of the traditional system. Even if errors, inconsistencies, and a false sense of accuracy are conceded, there remains the fact that the wide use of one system, in which we have had long experience, has its benefits for students, faculty, administrators, and society in general. Most academicians understand that a B grade at one university means something different than a B grade in another. But experience in the use of letter grades, both internally and externally, helps to guard against misuse and mis-interpretation. As a common currency, grades facilitate the student's transfer from one college or university to another. At a time when colleges and graduate schools are overwhelmed with applications for admissions, the traditional grade point average is one of the most consistent indicators of the student's probable success. Graduate deans and admissions officers ask how applications for admission to graduate school can be processed if, instead of grades and supporting recommendations, they had to interpret thick dossiers in an attempt to discriminate among them. Grades have, in short, been tested by experience as valuable, useful, and efficient.

As far as other alleged evils are concerned, the defenders of the traditional system can identify off-setting benefits. Grades provide a description of progress for students, protecting many from sporadic patterns of study or no study. It provides the student with a

measure of his own comprehension of a subject and his progress in learning. A student's grade profile serves to indicate for him and for others, areas of particular interest and capability in the selection of a major discipline or career.

For the teacher, conscientious grading can serve to indicate the success and failure of his instructional methods and to indicate the kinds of approaches that might be of greatest benefit to instructors in a class, or to sections of a course. Furthermore, in the course of time, a large number of courses and grades tend to balance out the false assumptions and inaccuracies which individual grades may hide and provide a shorthand communication useful to the student, the teachers, college and university administrators, and prospective employees. Finally, there is admittedly a type of personal accountability inherent in grading systems. Teachers, in general, have little or no pretense of perfection in their academic accounting systems, and students should realize that, throughout their lives, their actions, abilities, and achievements will constantly come under evaluation, as do the actions, abilities, and achievements of virtually every responsible member of our society.

If the traditional letter grade system is found to be so objectionable by some, I would remind them that there is probably no one panacea for the problems of student evaluation, and I advocate no one alternate to the letter grade system, or set of alternates to the grade-bound evaluation process. No one system, including the analytic-diagnostic methods and the dossier approach, is any worse or any better than the user who employs them. In this connection, it is fair to note that there are vastly more problem graders than there are grading problems.

It follows that the real possibility of early relief from the grading problem begins with a sympathetic and comprehensive perception of the problem by teacher/graders, a sensitized awareness of the capabilities and limitations of alternate methods of grading, a willingness to identify and discard the artificial rigidities in evaluation systems, a willingness to experiment with a mix of these alternates to achieve more flexible and meaningful techniques, and a philosophical resilience which has the capacity to accommodate new, more appropriate, and more personalized methods of student evaluation as suggested alternates are explored.

Faculty should be free to experiment, and should receive administrative encouragement for such experimentation, in order to arrive at new ways of measuring a student's progress -

ways which are more meaningful to him and his total development. Much more individual counseling and personalized diagnostic evaluation should be employed by faculty. Institutions should maintain standing committees to provide continuing opportunities to discuss the evaluation of student performance, and such committees should encourage a greater appreciation for and recognition of individual educational objectives. Also, students should have a greater choice in the selection of systems by which their progress towards individual objectives might be measured. I strongly urge that each college and university develop a mix, or a combination of evaluation mechanisms and processes, appropriate to the great variety of its educational and institutional objectives and to broader professional and social aims as well.

I believe that the dragon of the traditional grading system is not really a dragon at all. I believe that the letter grade system will survive and persist. However, we will undoubtedly witness a sharp reduction in the number of letter grades used, with much more attention paid to the diagnostic function of student evaluation, concerned not alone with the determination of relative ability, but with a finer discrimination of individual interests, abilities, and skills. As graduate deans, we should also realize that other dragons will appear before us, as they indeed have, dragons which will ask us to defend the whole host of graduate regulations which now filter, guide, exhort, discipline, assess, push, and sometimes hinder our graduate students in pursuit of advanced degrees. There is an increasing feeling among graduate students that they are working under a climate of threat and fear of failure. Fear should not be the dominant motif in a graduate student's life. The real goal of graduate training-education - namely, learning and enlightenment, is often subsumed by the paraphernalia of performance criteria.

We must be prepared increasingly to defend or to change, and at least to define more clearly, the missions and regulations of degree programs; the purposes and usefulness of the residency requirements; the purposes and value of the dissertation; of transfer regulations; of the nature of comprehensives, and other graduate school legislation. The student must increasingly be respected as an individual. We cannot demean the student by imposing irrational rules and regulations upon him without a credible rationale.

I am convinced that it is primarily the responsibility of faculty and of graduate advisers to see to it that a student's graduate years are years of satisfying and profitable quest for

creativity and for personal and intellectual maturity as well. As graduate deans, we can do much to encourage a greater sense of responsibility to graduate students on the part of faculty and graduate advisers.

There is some tendency for us to regard graduate education as an intellectual experience alone, leading students to the summit of knowledge and grace. For a responsible answer to the grading crisis, however, I believe we must have an abiding awareness that graduate education is much more than an intellectual experience alone, but an intensely individual and profound emotional one as well.